Then I'll Come Back to You

By LARRY EVANS

Author of "Once to Every Man"

CHAPTER XVI.

A Game of Cards.

"WHEN they tuck a ninety-nine year clause into a franchise they mean it's forever, don't they?" Joe wanted to know.

"Forever, to all intents and purposes!" said Garry.

Joe's chest sank and rose in a long, long breath.

"It's no word to trifle with," he cautioned at last. "If you lose it'll be a considerable drouth."

"Cut!" invited Garry, and they started to play.

That other night Garry's stack of chips had lasted far longer than they did on this second occasion. A half hour later, when he rose to go to bed, his ninety-nine year promise of abstinence was piled symmetrically before Fat Joe. But his good night was gay. For a time after his departure Joe eyed Steve sidewise.

"Hum-m-m," he cleared his throat. "Hum-m-m! And I was expectin' you to turn up any hour of the last twenty-four with a request that I come and help bring home the remains. You must be quite a silver tongued exhorter, aren't you, Steve?"

Stephen O'Mara was silent over the paper which Joe had handed him earlier in the evening, and the lack of any offer on his part to go into details did not trouble his questioner. Fat Joe sat and bobbed his head over what would never cease to be a miracle in his eyes.

"And he'll stick this time," he vented his wonder aloud. "He's surely going to stick!" Then he smiled widely. "And I reckon you'll have to admit that I handled the small part that came my way with ease and dispatch when I tell you that he didn't catch so much as one lonesome pair all the time I was dealing. I'm ashamed of myself. I haven't seen such a mean, crooked game of stud dealt since I came east!"

Garry was very quiet the next morning when he and Steve went back to their work; before noon came his uneasiness had become very apparent to the man he was assisting. But neither his silence nor his nervousness any longer worried Steve. Instead the latter let himself smile over both those outward evidences of inward panic, whenever his thoughts were on Garry at all. For the latter's diffidence as the day aged became a flushed and warm cheeked thing, until at 4 in the afternoon Steve could no longer withhold the suggestion for which, wordlessly, Garry was asking.

"Joe was more than half right," he remarked, one eye to his level, "in spite of the fact that we refused to take him seriously. We can't let those people come in and find everything too hopelessly uncomfortable, so perhaps you'd better run ahead now, Garry, and see what he has accomplished. I don't want to leave this spot myself until I have some figures upon which I know I can rely. But you might run ahead, if you will. I'll be along later."

It was couched in the form of a request, but Garry's face flamed. He went, albeit a bit reluctantly. And he stopped more than a few times in his climb from the edge of the timber to the door of Steve's shack. But once he had passed over the threshold to find that unrecognizably trim room empty, his face grew heavy with disappointment. He was on the point of going back outside to scan the bowl of the valley when a tall, short skirted figure, enveloped in a voluminous apron which Fat Joe in a moment of mistaken zeal had once provided for the cook boy, flashed through the passageway from the kitchen annex and barely missed catapulting into his arms. Miriam Burrell, pink faced from the heat of the roaring wood stove and smudged with flour on forehead and cheek, lifted her apron and swung it like a flag of victory.

"I've found it," she sang triumphantly. "I've found out what was the matter! I'd just forgotten the baking powder, that was all! Next time"—

Then she recognized him. With outstretched hands still clutching the edge of her apron, she stood, almond eyes widening, and scanned him from head to foot. Even Steve, who had been with him every moment, had noticed the hour to hour change that had been taking place in Garry's appearance. To the girl who had not seen him for weeks, that flushed, self conscious man was a different Garry than she had never known before. Hungrily her gaze went from open shirt to caked boots, from steady hands to clear eyes which made her own eyes shy. And then Miriam Burrell, cool and poised Miriam, did what many another maid in a checkered apron has done in similar situations. She lifted that stiff gingham to hide her unutterable happiness. But before he could speak she found her voice, nor was it very steady at that.

"I thought you were that party of Hilers come back," she hesitated. "How—how tanned you are becoming, Garry! I thought they—oh, I can't tell you how glad I am to see you so—so well. I'm making biscuits for supper—that is, I've just been practicing until now. It seemed as though I'd forgotten something that was necessary to the recipe, because they were flatter after they were cooked than when I put them in the oven. And most marvelously heavy too! But it was just the baking powder, that was all. Do you—do you think you'd care to help?"

Steve was very late in returning to camp that night. Throughout the rest of the afternoon he set himself a pace knee deep in slushy mud which Garry could not have maintained. But when he paused there in the dark where he always stopped for a moment and a tumult of voices swept down to meet him he forgot his fatigue. He had lifted his battered hat from his head, striving to distinguish a single note in all that treble of girlish laughter, when, framed suddenly against the background of light within, he saw a slender silhouette take up its station in the door frame. Barbara was still peering out across the darkness when he came up to her.

"We've been waiting dinner for you for almost an hour," she rebuked him in place of what might have been a commonplace greeting. "We've been waiting in the face of Mr. Morgan's insistence that it was practically useless. He has been telling us that when a man here in the hills fails to turn up for a meal you never bother to look for him. You know that the worst has happened."

Over her head the first eyes that Steve encountered that evening were those of Archibald Wickersham. While shaking hands with the girl he bowed in grave welcome to the tall figure in

"Oh, I can't tell you how glad I am to see you!"

leather puttees and whipcord riding breeches, and Wickersham from the far side of the room bowed back in equal gravity. Then Caleb Hunter grasped Steve's elbow and spun him around toward the light and peered at him accusingly. Barbara had not noticed until then how tired Steve looked.

"Before the others get to talking," said Caleb, "before the tide grows too strong for my weak voice, young man, I want to deliver a message. Miss Sarah wants it explicitly understood that unless you stop in to say hello on your next trip down she herself will take the trail up here. And lest that ultimatum sound too little threatening I might add that when Miss Sarah takes the trail she never travels with less than six trunks."

Caleb clung so tightly to his arm that it brought a tinge of color to Steve's cheeks. It was minutes before he could get away to change his wet clothes, and in that minute or two he could not help but contrast, grimly, his own mud bespattered attire with that of Archie Wickersham. The tired blue circles beneath his eyes were even more noticeable when he returnd, to be ushered with much ceremony by Fat Joe to the head of the table.

It was an utterly irresponsible gathering that leaned over the red tablecloth that night—an oddly assorted group which from the very first Joe realized was not at all to Wickersham's liking. Dexter Allison himself, fairly radiating good will, sat at the foot of the table, with his son-in-law to be on one side and Barbara's little maid, Cecile, on the other. And between Cecile and Barbara, who sat opposite Garry and Miriam, Fat Joe leaned both elbows upon the table edge and monopolized the conversation. The seating arrangement was Joe's; it was his party. And the absolute inattention to detail, the large indifference to veracity which his discourse disclosed before that noisy supper was over, grew to be an astonishing thing. His flights of fancy left Steve aghast in more than one instance; they even forced a stiff smile to Wickersham's lips, and that is saying much for Joe's success as an entertainer, for in the bearing of those two men toward each other there had been evident from the first a chill antipathy which amounted actually to armed truce. And the color in Miriam's cheeks, whenever his gaze strayed to that side of the table, helped Steve to forget, temporarily, much that he found not pleasant to recall at all.

For Miriam's tongue was no less irresponsible than was Joe's. Her mood was so mercurial that she drew time and again the eyes of all at the table. She chattered with an abandon that scandalized Barbara; broke in and interrupted every argument with boydenish trivialities, in one breath, to appeal to Garry the next for refutation. And Garry, the light tongued and quick witted, sat almost dumb of lip before her happy garrulity. But his eyes never left her; they spoke his thoughts aloud. The quick lift and droop of her eyelids, the brilliancy of her lips, made Miriam's face a living thing of happiness—made Barbara's silence seem even more profound. For the latter's withdrawal from the hilarity, dominated half the time by her father's booming bass, was nearly as complete as that of Wickersham himself.

Just once, shortly before they withdrew for the night, Steve caught a gleam of mischief in the dark eyes she turned toward him. She rose the next moment and started slowly around the room, poking demurely into corners and closeted nooks. Every eye was following her when she finally found the thing for which she was searching. She drew a red felt, yellow mottoed cushion from beneath the deer hide covering a chair and held it up so that all might read. "What Is Home Without a Father?" it ran, and when the joy that stormed through the room made it sure that the exhibition needed no interpreter Fat Joe turned and hid his face. Miriam rose languidly and joined the other girl in an examination of his handiwork. Smooth face tinted by the firelight, copper hair almost disheveled in its disarray, she was an exquisitely lovely thing. In her alto voice she expressed her opinion.

"It's an entirely new stitch to me, Bobs," she averred. "I don't think I have ever before seen just this method employed." And she turned to Stephen O'Mara. "Do you suppose, Mr. O'Mara," she asked, "that I might learn it from the one who did this work for you? It's rather"—and her head tilted to one side—"it's rather a pretty thing."

Again they succumbed to mirth, and then Joe rose, bristling, and went forward much as a gamecock might step out to do battle. He took the cushion from the hands of the girls, who no longer had strength enough even to hold it.

"If you are aiming to do any sewing around this camp," he stated, "you can start in sewing on buttons. This kind of work is entirely too nerve wearing for amateurs."

He carried the cushion across the room and placed it not where it had been hidden by the deer hide, but in colorful prominence against the back of the chair. Long after he had crossed with Steve and Garry to their tents he continued to explode with soft chuckles.

"I never did say," he defended himself, "that that sentiment was strictly appropriate. I always stated that it was the best I could. And as for my technique—well, either of you guys try it some time. You just take a needleful of that yellow worsted and start tracking across a couple of yards of red and pathless desert and see where you come out. I know, because I've done it. I'm a pioneer. But if I ever tackle another job like that it's going to be a crazy quilt."

And Joe considered in spite of the din which answered him that his challenge was ample.

It was fully an hour after Fat Joe and Garry had rolled themselves up in their blankets when Steve, who had elected to sit up for one last pipe even though his body was aching with fatigue, heard behind him the approach of her footsteps. Outside at the top of the rise some fifty yards in front of the tents he had seated himself on a log, chin buried in one palm and eyes vacantly steady before him. But even before he turned, before he rose slowly to his feet, he knew who was coming, knew and realized that she should not have come. Wrapped in a long heavy coat, face half hidden by the upturned collar, bare of head, Barbara came quietly down to where he waited. And without word of greeting on the part of either of them they sat down together, facing the silvered bowl of the valley.

Time passed before Barbara opened her lips for a long, quivering intake of breath.

"I never dreamed it could be so big," she murmured in awe. "And then to think that some day—within a few months in reality—engines will go screeching their signals across this very place. It doesn't seem possible; it seems almost a shame to spoil it too."

"I've felt that way about it often," Steve answered, almost dully. "I like it better myself as it is. It does appear to be a long way ahead, doesn't it—that day of completion which you

"I never dreamed it could be so big."

cover in the screech of the whistles? Only today when we were scrambling about down there in the alders it took nearly all the imagination I possessed to see two streaks of steel where there is nothing but thicket now. But as for the bigness of it"—he laughed deprecatingly—"it isn't so very big, you know. It's just a—a mean sort of proposition."

"To me," Barbara said—"to me it is colossal! Why, I thought the work at Morrison seemed complicated and tangled enough, but there—there isn't even a beginning or an ending here. There's nothing but woods and water."

She pointed out across the valley toward a moundlike outline yellow under the moon; pointed into the north and asked another question.

"Is that part of the embankment?" she wanted to know. "Is that the direction in which Mr. Wickersham's timber lies?"

The man nodded.

"Just a few miles up through that notch," he told her. "That's the end of the rail bed which we have been building along the river edge."

Her next words made him start and then try to cover that moment with a readjustment of his long body.

"I'm going up there tomorrow. Mr. Wickersham has asked me to ride with him in the morning." She waited a moment or two. "That—that's why I came out here tonight. We'll be going back to town the next day or two, and I wanted to have a chance to bid you goodby before I left Morrison for the winter."

He had known that she would not be likely to remain in the hills much longer. He had realized that each day which he checked off, always hopeful that the next might open the way for him to see her again, was steadily bringing nearer the date of her departure. But he had not let himself think that it would come so soon. There was no doubt this time about the heaviness of his voice.

"I see," he said. "I see."

There came a long silence. Rising out of it, Barbara's voice sounded very, very little.

"I've never known a sky in which the stars were so thick. They're—they're like a field of buttercups. And have you ever seen such an irrepressibly happy creature as Miriam was tonight? She was radiant, positively shameless. Did you know that Garry knows"—

"I told him myself," said Steve simply.

The girl faced around in her surprise.

"You?"

"Most certainly. Why not?" His voice was not quite so unenthusiastic now. "It's one of the few unmistakable opportunities I've ever had to make two people permanently as happy as Miriam was tonight. I'd feel guilty all my life if I didn't help all I could, knowing how happy I am going to be myself."

Thus did he work around, quite without abruptness, to a renewal of that discussion which she had thought to close weeks before.

"Are you trying to infer that I am to be a part of that happiness?" she asked none too promisingly.

"You ought to know. I said 'all my life.'"

And there suddenly Barbara laughed.

"I suppose now they'll marry and live happily ever after!" she exclaimed, with an attempt at airiness.

"Most certainly," asserted Steve, although her mirth puzzled him. "Why is it funny to you?"

"It isn't, but—yes, it is too, now that it's no longer a thing one need worry about. That's always the trouble with emotions which are too intense. They're either very sad to contemplate or very, very absurd. And they will persist in exchanging faces, to the confusion of the onlookers. Garry was so dangerously in love with Mary Graves, you see."

"He was in love with an idea," the man contradicted flatly. "He was in love with just that. And it is not safe for any man to live alone with an abstract conception of anything. He's bound sooner or later to lose his grip on tangible things if he does. He's likely to start destroying property to further the cause of labor or liable to turn to shooting men who were born to jobs I'm certain some of them never wanted—kings and that sort, I mean—figuring on solving the social problems of men and women who must solve that problem themselves. Perfection is a fine thing to anticipate; expectations of it are dangerous. And women aren't made that way."

"No?" Her voice slid coolly upward.

"No," he told her and smiled with that serenity she had come to know so well. "Not even you, though I suppose I'd about annihilate any one else if he ever hinted at it." He chose to be didactic in tone. "No, you're not perfect. You've too much intelligence for that. Why, right now you're fighting with your brain against the dictates of your heart, and if you were above mortal error in judgment you'd know that you are wasting your time."

"Your opinion has the merit of sincerity," she said, "although, looking back upon a—a certain day, I can't help but wonder whether you haven't been guilty of mouthing pretty nothings for my poor ears."

"That proves my point right now." He was imperturbable. "You're begging the question to gain"—

"You said"— she flashed and then grew red.

"I said I'd let you ask no pardon of me. I said I'd let myself find no flaw in you. But how does that embarrass my present argument? Flawless perfection would be a mighty difficult thing to live with day in and day out. Living with a woman who never made a mistake could have no appeal for me. She'd always be emphasizing my own shortcomings. You become consistent and you'll catch me yawning some day; grow logical and you'll almost scare me off! Why, you're a girl!"

Her laughter was like a bell on the still air.

"And you—you still sit there and insist that perfection has no attraction for you? When you've just described without knowing it the—the sort of a girl you think is perfect."

His lips curled in a way to quicken any woman's pulse.

"You have me beaten," he laughed. His eyes, dark as was the shadow upon his face, made her breath unsteady. "I would like to watch you play poker with Fat Joe. Your game would puzzle him more than a little. Yes, you've surely left me without a leg on which to hobble off, because it would be small spirited in me, wouldn't it, if I were to tell you that you are the exception that makes my general rule hold sound? I wouldn't, however, prescribe such a degree of perfection for any other man's daily diet. It would prove his destruction."

"Your own superiority, of course, rendering you immune?"

"Maybe." At least, whether she knew it or not, she loved his serenity. "Maybe—and maybe I'm an exception too."

He sat very still. She had turned away once more.

"You'll be back again in the spring?" he asked with that gentleness he saved for her alone.

"I hope—I think so." The smallness of her voice angered her. She feigned a short, carefree laugh. "Unless I am too busy. Getting married seems to become a more and more complicated problem of proper costuming, doesn't it, with every passing season?"

She couldn't have told why she said it. She was trying to think of something else to say which would be kinder by far. And then, half lifting her, he had swung her around to him. For a moment he held her, face close to that small, frightened face buried in its deep collar, while she struggled uselessly against those hard arms, which tried not to hurt her. Her lips continued to rebel long after her eyes had closed—long after body and brain were quiescent.

"You mustn't!" she gasped. "Oh, I can't let you—the moon—we—we're sure to be seen!"

His lips on hers silenced that last incoherent resistance. She sat, wavy brown head bowed, when he had set her free.

"I was going to ask you not to forget!" There was no weariness now in his voice. "I had planned to ask you just that a little ago, and it would have been a weak and useless request, wouldn't it? Any man who has to beg to be remembered is not the sort to remain long in any woman's brain. So I have taught you to remember instead. You aren't going to forget ever now! You're coming back in the spring, and you're coming to stay! And now I'm telling you goodby. It's time you were asleep."

He helped her to her feet. Together they turned—and Archibald Wickersham, tall to gauntness in the moonlight, was coming across toward them from the direction of the cabin. The girl's slim body stiffened, but Steve saw her chin come up. His own body grew lazier still it seemed in length and limb.

Wickersham's approaching steps were crisply precise. He stopped an arm's length in front of them, and his words were an echo of that last sentence of Steve's.

"It's time you retired," he said, ignoring the other man's presence entirely. "It's cold, and you have a long, hard ride ahead of you tomorrow."

For a barely perceptible moment, with the eyes of both men upon her, Barbara kept her place. Neither of them saw that her teeth were tightly closed over one full lip; neither knew that she had closed her eyes dizzily for an instant. And then without a word she put her hand upon the arm which Wickersham offered her. But Steve, on the other side, walked with her that night as far as the door of the storehouse shack. Miriam herself opened the door and snatched Barbara within and then laughed with her consummate impudence into both men's faces.

"G'lang wid ye's now," she flung at them, "an' quit disturbin' dacint folks that likes to sleep o' nights!"

She slammed the door upon them.

They stood there a second or two, Wickersham an inch or more taller and inches narrower in shoulder and girth of chest. Perfunctorily they nodded each to the other and wheeled silently upon their heels.

It was the next evening when Barbara re-entered the house beyond the hedge. There was a streak of light running out across the floor of the dim

"You mustn't!" she gasped. "Oh, I can't let you—the moon—we—we're sure to be seen!"

hall from within, and the girl lingered on her hurried way to her own room to bid her father good night. But she found Wickersham alone when she pushed wider the door. The light was behind him, and she could not see how distorted was his face, yet as she paused on the threshold and a thin and pungent odor crinkled her nostrils she sensed somehow that he had not been long alone.

"Father gone to bed?" she called. "Well, that's wise. You'd better come, too; it's time you were asleep."

She did not remember just then that other night when he had addressed those same words to her. She only knew that his features became suffused with purple even before she had finished. And then she realized quickly that it was alcohol she smelled; knew, too, that it was not Wickersham who had been drinking, even though Wickersham had trouble with his tongue. And while she waited, puzzled and frowning, the man gave up an attempt at his usual nicety of phrase and blurted out all that which had been many days hidden behind his impassivity.

"We haven't yet set a certain date for our marriage, Barbara." His voice was strained. "Don't you think it is high time we did?"

The girl colored. It was, at least, very unexpected.

"Why, no, we haven't," she admitted.

"But we can if you wish it. Have you thought of a day you'd prefer?"

"I have," he stated. "Would the first day of May be too early for you?"

Often afterward she wondered at her humility of that night, for whatever the quick thought might have been which made her reach out one hand to touch the door frame beside her her words were merely mild.

"It is, rather. But I think I can manage it if it will please you."

Wickersham had come to his feet, but he would not turn so that she might see his face. He spoke with eyes averted.

"It would," he answered with an effort, "and—and in the interim I am

She Understood at Last How Much Wickersham Had Seen.

going to be very sure now that no thoughtlessness of yours will be derogatory either to my profound respect for you or your own respect for yourself."

The small hand closed then until it was clutching whitely the woodwork beneath it. She understood at last how much Wickersham had seen; she was never to understand entirely her mood of that moment, for had she waited she would have left him with finger ringless. Instead, she wheeled without a word and climbed, white lipped, upstairs.

(To be Continued)

The Industrious Bee.

Busy, busy little bee,
Work all day industriously,
Gathering honey drop by drop
From each nodding clover top.

Golden beams of sunny light
Gladly kiss you in your flight;
Golden treasure store for me—
Sunny, sunny little bee.

A Fort in the Sand.

Down near the beach at Southampton, N. Y., lives little Charlie Smith. There with his playmates he spends many pleasant hours. Here you see

Photo by American Press Association.

THE RIFLEMAN.

him behind his sand fort looking through a port made of a discarded life buoy, probably thrown away from a yacht. He is in deep earnest, as his broomstick gun clearly proves.

Woman's Method.

"Mr. Floorwalker, I wish you would give me a clerk who can show me what I want."

"And what do you want, madam?"

"How do I know until I have looked?"—Houston Post.

Sound travels through dry air at the rate of sixty feet a second, through water at 240 feet a second and in steel wire at 17 130 feet a second.